

POTOMAC AVENUE
(Georgia Avenue)
Washington
District of Columbia

HABS NO. DC-707

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DC
WASH
629-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
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Department of the Interior
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

POTOMAC AVENUE (Georgia Avenue)

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Location: Potomac Avenue stretches from Second Street between R and S streets, SW, in a straight line northeast to First Street, SE, where it is interrupted by the Washington Navy Yard. It begins again at Twelfth and K streets, SE, and continues along the same angle to 19th Street, SE.

Owner/Manager: The right-of-way spanning from building line to building line is the property of the U. S. government; the paved roadways, sidewalks, and the planted areas between are under the jurisdiction of the District of Columbia Department of Public Works. The reservations at the Pennsylvania Avenue intersection are maintained by the National Park Service (NPS), the remaining smaller parks are under the jurisdiction of the District of Columbia.

Present Use: The south portion of the avenue from First Street, SW, to the Navy Yard is used by industrial vehicles. The northern segment, from the Navy Yard to 19th Street runs through a residential area, but supports some commuter traffic.

Significance: This avenue remains largely faithful to its design on the L'Enfant and Ellicott city plans, although much of the land flanking the southern segment is vacant or used for industrial purposes and storage. Between Eleventh and 14th streets, SE, the avenue is included in the National Register of Historic Places Capitol Hill Historic District.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of plan: 1791, L'Enfant Plan; 1792 Ellicott Plan.
2. Alterations and additions:

1903:	Expansion of the Navy Yard to the west overwhelms several blocks of the avenue, including Reservation Nos. 249 and 250.
1926:	Further Navy Yard expansion overwhelms west to First Streets, SE, including Reservation No. 248.
1944:	After years of private occupation, Reservation Nos. 242-248 are transferred from the park system.
1960/70s:	Southeast/Southwest Freeway constructed over the avenue at Eleventh Street; intersection of Potomac and Pennsylvania avenues reconfigured during Metrorail construction.

B. Historical Context:

On Pierre L'Enfant's plan of 1791 the avenue originates at the Navy Yard on the Anacostia River and continues northeast at 66 degrees, intersecting first with what is now Virginia Avenue at a yellow-shaded rectangle labeled "No. 13." It terminates at a large open space on the Anacostia River set aside for a hospital. While the avenue is limited to the southeast quadrant in the L'Enfant Plan,

Andrew Ellicott's plan of 1792 extends it into the southwest quadrant to the arsenal grounds at Greenleaf Point. From there, it heads northeast at 63 degrees and crosses over the James Creek Canal, near the point where the canal empties into the Anacostia River. The avenue then crosses the northwest corner of the rectangle assigned to the Navy Yard and intersects Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Kentucky avenues, respectively.

Potomac Avenue was originally designated as Georgia Avenue, accordingly, the southernmost avenue named for the southernmost state at the time. Its name was changed to Potomac Avenue in 1908-09 when Brightwood Avenue (a road in the northwest quadrant that extended Seventh Street beyond the Florida Avenue boundary into the suburbs) was renamed Georgia Avenue. Georgia Sen. Augustus Bacon convinced residents of the Brightwood neighborhood to support a bill to change the avenue's name apparently because he felt the state of Georgia deserved a more impressive street than "two little squares down near the Navy Yard."¹

The senator's remark validly described the avenue, which by that date was still largely unimproved. The squares he referred to were probably Reservation Nos. 126 and 251, which the Army Corps of Engineers had recently improved as parks.

Although the avenue was designed by Ellicott to connect the Navy Yard with Greenleaf Point and was envisioned by L'Enfant as a bustling commercial area, throughout most of the city's first century the changing shoreline of the Anacostia River rendered the avenue impassable. Maps throughout the 1880s show that sections between First and Second streets, SE, and between Fourth and Sixth streets were submerged. This factor, and the avenue's remote location contributed to its slow development. The 1857-61 Boschke map indicates that the only significant development on the avenue was in the vicinity of the Navy Yard and around the Virginia Avenue intersection. Two blocks at the northeast end of the avenue were flanked by cemeteries.²

While most of the city's neglected avenues were vastly improved between 1871-74, during the short-lived rule of a territorial government in Washington, Potomac Avenue remained unimproved. An 1887 Hopkins map indicates an unimproved road surface with the exception of one graveled block at the far east end of the avenue. This segment was probably improved due to its proximity to Congressional Cemetery and Gallinger Hospital, both located in the large federally owned reservation at the avenue's terminus.

Because of the slow development of the avenue, federal property intended for parks--like those gaining admiration throughout the rest of the city--were used illegally by neighboring landowners. Throughout the 1890s, a lumber yard occupied Reservation No. 249 in "violation of the law," and in the 1920s, as if giving up on ever improving it as a park, the Army Corps of Engineers leased Reservation No. 244 for \$10 per year as a private garden. When the Navy Yard was expanded, first in 1903, and again in 1926 it overwhelmed six blocks of the avenue from First to Sixth streets, SE, including the three reservations on this segment, Nos. 248, 249, and 250. Of these only Reservation No. 248 had been improved; it had been enclosed with post-and-chain fences in 1911.

Although most of the avenue was brought to grade and improved in the

¹ Grandine.

² Boschke map.

twentieth century, much of it remains undeveloped. The avenue was never improved west of First Street, SW, and although it was paved from First Street, SW, to the Navy Yard, the reservations in this section were never landscaped as parks. The southwest portion of the avenue has remained an industrial area, used by private and city contractors. Rails installed in the roadbed between First Street, SW, and the Navy Yard are still in place, since the roadway has never been thoroughly paved. Many of the reservations in this area are used as storage space by the piping and concrete manufacturers in the area; they were finally transferred to the District of Columbia for this purpose in 1944.

The segment of the avenue between the Navy Yard northeast to the hospital grounds was developed with middle- and working-class housing in the 1920-30s. As late as 1927, however, the block between 18th and 19th streets, although the first to be paved, had fallen to neglect, and the reservation there was filled with rubbish.

In the 1960-70s the Southeast/Southwest Freeway sliced through the avenue between M and K streets eliminating Reservation No. 252 and decreasing the size of the large playground at the intersection of Virginia Avenue. The segment of the avenue between Virginia and Pennsylvania avenues ran through a neighborhood that came to be seen as urban blight in the mid twentieth century, and during the massive urban redevelopment of the southwest quadrant, this area became the site of public housing projects. The remaining parks on the avenue were transferred to the jurisdiction of the District of Columbia in 1972 along with many others throughout the city. Also in the 1970s, Metrorail was constructed in the city and the Potomac Avenue Metro Station was built at the intersection with Pennsylvania Avenue.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. Overall dimensions:

1. Width: The right-of-way measures 160' from building line to building line.
2. Length within city limits: The avenue is contained entirely within the historic city limits. The segment southwest of the Navy Yard is about 0.4 miles and northwest of the Navy Yard about 0.75 miles.

B. Elements within the right-of-way:

1. Roadway: From Canal Street northeast to First Street, SW, the roadway is neither opened nor paved. From First Street, SW, to the Navy Yard, the avenue is poorly paved with rails embedded down the center. Traffic, which includes heavy industrial vehicles in this vicinity, travels one lane each way. North of the Navy Yard the roadway is paved and supports two-lane, two-way traffic with on-street parking except the block between 18th and 19th streets, which is one-way northbound. Two triangular medians in the roadway were added to alleviate traffic around the intersection with Pennsylvania Avenue.
2. Sidewalks and street trees: Southwest of the Navy Yard, this avenue lacks curbs and sidewalks. Northeast of the Navy Yard, it is paved and has concrete sidewalks with sodded strip parking planted with elms, both

mature and newly planted. Washington Globe lights illuminate the two blocks between M Street and Virginia Avenue in the vicinity of the Navy Yard. The rest is illuminated with highway lamps.

3. Major reservations:
 - a. Reservation No. 126 at the former intersection with Virginia Avenue has been used as a large playground since the first decade of the twentieth century. (See Virginia Avenue, HABS No. DC-712).
 - b. Reservation No. 54 at the intersection of Pennsylvania Avenue is now the site of a Metrorail station (See Pennsylvania Avenue, HABS No. DC-706).
4. Smaller reservations: The following list describes the locations of the reservations identified along this avenue by 1894, the date they were first recognized as federal property, the date of transfer, the date of first improvement, if known, and a description of historical and current appearance as of summer 1990.
 - a. Reservation No. 242: South of the avenue, west of Second Street, north of S Street, SW. Officially identified in 1872, this triangle was never improved; it was transferred to the District of Columbia January 11, 1944. It is now undistinguishable in a vast unimproved lot.
 - b. Reservation No. 243: North of the avenue, east of Second Street, south of R Street, SW. Officially identified in 1872 this reservation was graded in 1918 and marked with cast-iron posts, but it was never fully improved. It was transferred to the District of Columbia January 11, 1944. The space is now used to store sand.
 - c. Reservation No. 244: South of the avenue, west of Half Street, north of R Street, SW. Officially identified in 1872, this triangle was leased for \$10 a year as a private garden in the 1920s. It was transferred to the District of Columbia January 11, 1944. The space is now used for storage by the D.C. Dept of Public Works.
 - d. Reservation No. 245: North of the avenue, east of Half Street, south of Q Street, SW. Officially identified in 1872, this triangle was never improved and was transferred to the District of Columbia January 11, 1944, and is now used as storage yard No. 5 for the city's Materials Management Division.
 - e. Reservation No. 246: South of the avenue, west of Half Street, north of Q Street, SE. Officially identified in 1884, this reservation was transferred to the District of Columbia January 11, 1944, and is now used for concrete manufacture.
 - f. Reservation No. 247: North of the avenue, east of Half Street,

south of P Street, SE. Officially identified in 1887, this triangle was enclosed with post-and-chain fences in 1911. It was transferred to the District of Columbia January 11, 1944, and is now used by the city's Materials Management Division as storage yard No. 3.

- g. Reservation No. 248: East of First Street, south of O Street, SE. Officially identified in 1887, this triangle was enclosed with post-and-chain fences in 1911. It was transferred to the Navy Yard by an Act of Congress June 25, 1926.
- h. Reservation No. 249: North of the avenue, east of Fourth Street, south of H Street, SE. Never improved, this reservation was transferred to the Navy Yard by an Act of Congress March 3, 1903.
- i. Reservation No. 250: South of the avenue, west of Sixth Street, north of H Street, SE. Never improved, this reservation was transferred to the Navy Yard by an Act of Congress March 3, 1903.
- j. Reservation No. 251: South of the avenue, between Eighth and Ninth streets, north of M Street, SE. Officially identified 1872, this was the first reservation on the avenue to be improved when a post-and-chain fence was erected in 1904. Since then the park has been enlarged, but the historic triangle surrounded by the fence remains within the larger amorphous area. Brick and concrete perimeter sidewalks surround the remainder of the sodded reservation which serves as a waiting area for buses; it features two bus shelters, one on M Street and the other on the curved street bordering the north side of the park.
- k. Reservation No. 252: South of K Street, east of Eleventh Street, SE. Officially identified 1872, this triangle was brought to grade in 1911. It was transferred to the District of Columbia April 25, 1967 for construction of the Southeast/Southwest Freeway.
- l. Reservation No. 253: South of the avenue, east of Twelfth Street, north of K Street, SE. Officially identified in 1884, this triangle abuts City Square No. 1022. Transferred to the District of Columbia December 14, 1972, it now serves as a large playground within concrete and brick perimeter sidewalks. It features several types of playground equipment and an elaborate symmetrical design scheme featuring concrete backless benches and circular openings for trees surrounded by Belgian pavers and exposed aggregate concrete. Ornamental and shade trees provide a sheltered environment and large hedges backed by chain-link fencing delineate the park area from the surrounding streets. The park is in the midst of a public housing project and is in poor condition.
- m. Reservation No. 254: North of the avenue, west of 13th Street, south of I Street, SE. Officially identified in 1884, this triangle abuts City Square No. 1021. Transferred to the District of

Columbia December 14, 1972, it now serves as a large playground. Within concrete and brick perimeter sidewalks, it features playground equipment with a barnyard theme and an elaborate symmetrical design scheme featuring concrete backless benches and circular openings for tree plantings surrounded by Belgian pavers and exposed aggregate concrete. Ornamental and shade trees provide a sheltered environment and large hedges backed by chain-link fencing delineate the park area from the surrounding streets. The park is in the midst of a public-housing project and is in poor condition.

- n. Reservation No. 255: North of the avenue, west of 15th Street, south of G Street, SE. Officially identified in 1884, this triangle abutting City square No. 1064 was partially improved in 1903 when it was graded, sodded and surrounded with a fence. Transferred to the District of Columbia December 14, 1972, it now features three symmetrically placed shade trees and is well maintained. It is delineated from a concrete perimeter sidewalk by quarter-round coping. East of the reservation is a triangular concrete traffic divider.
 - o. Reservation No. 256: South of the avenue, west of 16th Street, north of G Street, SE. Officially identified in 1884, this triangle was transferred to the District of Columbia December 14, 1972, it now features four ornamental trees and overgrown shrub massing. It is delineated from brick and concrete perimeter sidewalks by quarter-round coping.
 - p. Reservation No. 257: North of the avenue, west of 18th Street, south of E Street, SE. Officially identified 1872, this triangle was transferred to the District of Columbia December 14, 1972. The sodded triangle is delineated from concrete perimeter sidewalks by quarter-round coping. It is located across the street from Congressional Cemetery.
 - q. Reservation No. 258: South of the avenue, east of 18th Street, north of E Street, SE. Officially identified in 1884, this triangle is located across from Congressional Cemetery, near the D.C. General Hospital. It abuts City Square No. S1114 which contains two-story rowhouses. It is sodded and has quarter-round coping on the E Street side and is surrounded by concrete perimeter sidewalks. It was transferred to the jurisdiction of the District of Columbia on December 14, 1972.
5. Front yards: South of the Navy Yard, no front yards or sidewalks are delineated. North of the Navy Yard, the residential area features wide front yards.
- C. Framing elements: Southwest of the Navy Yard, the avenue passes through an industrial area with functional structures and storage yards. Northeast of the Navy Yard the avenue is mostly residential with two- and three-story rowhouses built

for the most part after the 1920s. The 1700 block northeast runs past Congressional Cemetery.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Maps:

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L'Enfant, Pierre Charles. "Plan of the City of Washington." 1791.

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Office of Public Buildings and Grounds. "Map of the City of Washington showing the Public Reservations Under Control of the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds." 1884, 1887, and 1894.

Toner, Joseph M. "Sketch of Washington in Embryo." 1874.

B. Early Views:

1927-29: Survey photographs of each reservation (photographs of reservations under NPS Jurisdiction are in the NPS Reservation Files; photographs of reservations transferred from NPS to the District of Columbia are in the HSW Reservations Collection).

C. Bibliography:

Annual Reports of the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds. U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. 1867-1933.

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Reservation Files. Office of Land Use. National Capital Region Headquarters. National Park Service.

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PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION:

The Plan of Washington, D.C., project was carried out from 1990-93 by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER) Division, Robert J. Kapsch, chief. The project sponsors were the Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation Inc. of Washington, D.C.; the Historic Preservation Division, District of Columbia Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs, which provided Historic Preservation Fund monies; the National Capital Region and its White House Liaison office, NPS; and the National Park Foundation Inc.

HABS historian Sara Amy Leach was the project leader and Elizabeth J. Barthold was project historian. Architectural delineators were: Robert Arzola, HABS; Julianne Jorgensen, University of Maryland; Robert Juskevich, Catholic University of America; Sandra M. E. Leiva, US/ICOMOS-Argentina; and Tomasz Zweich, US/ICOMOS-Poland, Board of Historical Gardens and Palace Conservation. Katherine Grandine served as a data collector. The photographs are by John McWilliams, Atlanta, except for the aerial views, which are by Jack E. Boucher, HABS, courtesy of the U.S. Park Police - Aviation Division.